

Catholic Church collects \$1.6 billion in U.S. contracts, grants since 2012



Amid Pope Francis' first-ever visit to the U.S. this week, some analysts are digging into the books to note the amount of money the American government doles out to Catholic charities every year. (*Associated Press*) [more >](#)

By Kelly Riddell - *The Washington Times* - Thursday, September 24, 2015

Not to be lost in the pomp and circumstance of Pope Francis' first visit to Washington is the reality that the Catholic Church he oversees has become one of the largest recipients of federal largesse in America.

The Church and related Catholic charities and schools have collected more than \$1.6 billion since 2012 in U.S. contracts and grants in a far-reaching relationship that spans from school lunches for grammar school students to contracts across the globe to care for the poor and needy at the expense of Uncle Sam, a Washington Times review of federal spending records shows.

Former Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York once famously noted in 1980 that the government funded 50 percent of Catholic Charities' budget, commenting "private institutions really aren't private anymore." Today, those estimates remain about the same, according to Leslie Lenkowsky, who served as the chief executive officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service under George W. Bush.

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Catholic Charities USA, the largest charitable organization run by the church, receives about 65 percent of its annual budget from state and federal governments, making it an arm of the federal welfare state, said Brian Anderson, a researcher with the Manhattan Institute.

The federal government came to increasingly rely on the church to help it with Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty," and the charities "imbued with their new faith in the government's potential to solve social problems, eagerly accepted government money," Mr. Anderson wrote in an essay for the Manhattan Institute.



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Catholic Charities received nearly a quarter of its funding from government by the end of the 1960s, more than half by the late 1970s and more than 60 percent by the mid-1980s, the level where it has remained ever since, Mr. Anderson said.

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Today, Catholic charity work is a large part of this nation's social safety net, according to Mr. Lenkowsky, now a professor of practice in public affairs and philanthropy at Indiana University.

"A lot of the charity is distributing food, running homeless shelters, most things considered charitable," said Mr. Lenkowsky. "So what we're not talking about is federal money being paid for priests and religious activities."

Fifty-seven government agencies are now contracting with the Catholic Church. If the church were a state, its \$1.6 billion in funding would rank it about 43rd out of the 50 states in total federal funding, according to analysis by Adam Andrzejewski, founder of OpenTheBooks.com. The majority of those funds are dedicated to refugee services and rehabilitation.

"Churches have generally looked to find common cause with secular goals, adapting their activities to the secular philanthropic model, if only to benefit from grants from the U.S. government," Olivier Zunz, a social historian, wrote in his book "Philanthropy in America." "Catholic Relief Services and federated Protestant charities have acted not as missions but as humanitarian institutions combining taxpayer money with their own for carrying out modernizing projects in many theaters around the world."

However, Mr. Anderson argues, because the Catholic Church and its charities are so ingrained in the U.S. government's welfare system, it's hard to reform and better it. For example, in 1996 Catholic Charities lobbied heavily against welfare-reform law and met with then-President Clinton to help derail it. At the time, a Jesuit priest, the Rev. Fred Kammer, who is now the director of the Jesuit Social Research Institute at Loyola University, said the welfare-reform law would be "a national social catastrophe. No one will be spared the consequences."

There's also friction between state and church, with Catholic charities taking on such a prominent role in the government's welfare system.

Conservative Christians, unlike Catholics and some other religious charities such as those run by Lutherans, have resisted taking federal money to do charitable work, insisting proselytism and good works go hand in hand and can't be separated from one another — which most federal and state grants require.

"If a religious institution is required to do something that is in conflict of its religious views, it may opt out from receiving federal funding or make the pragmatic decision to stay in to get the funding," said Mr. Lenkowsky.

For example, most of the Catholic charities in Illinois have decided to close down their adoption programs rather than comply with a state requirement that says they can no longer receive state funding if they turn away same-sex couples for adoptive services or foster care.

"On one hand the government can't make any laws infringing on someone's civil liberties, but it also has to protect free expression of religion, and those are in tension in the age of the welfare state, where you are contracting with a religious organization to deliver secular social services," Mr. Lenkowsky said. In many of these cases, it will be up to the courts to decide, he added.

Georgetown University, the nation's oldest Catholic and Jesuit University, broke with church doctrine in order to accommodate for civil rights.

When faced with the decision to officially recognize a student homosexual group on its campus, it decided to formally recognize it for fear it would be in violation of Washington, D.C.'s civil rights law and anti-discrimination protections. The school wanted to build a new dormitory at the time and needed municipal bonds to secure it.

For Catholic Charities USA, the priority of helping those in need trumps all, and they can't fulfill that mission without financial assistance from the government.

"While Catholic Charities agencies, and many other faith-based non-profits, will continue to work with families and individuals on the brink, we know that in order for our nation to truly make a significant change in the numbers of those in poverty, we need support and commitment from the for-profit sector and from government. We cannot do this alone," the group said in a statement to The Times.

The nation is better off having Catholic charities participate in the federal welfare system than the alternative of having only secular organization and the government do it, Mr. Lenkowsky said.

"Not only would Catholic charities be hurt, but our society would be much worse off because these services would be provided by government employees and secular service agencies run by social workers," Mr. Lenkowsky said. "There's certain things Catholic charities can do that social workers can't do, like pastoral counseling — a minister trained to give counseling to people facing critical issues like substance abuse."

If Catholic charities were cut out of the federal system, secular social workers may determine that pastors may not be qualified to give counseling, eliminating a helpful avenue for some in need, he said.

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